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# Political culture and television fiction

## The Amazing Mrs Pritchard

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**ABSTRACT** Recently, the study of politics has expanded its scope by recognizing the constitutive power of ‘political culture’ at the same time as cultural studies has become more interested in formal political processes and their relationship to popular culture. This article is a case study of political culture in the United Kingdom, focusing on one example of fictional expression, a television drama series broadcast in 2006: *The Amazing Mrs Pritchard*. The premise of the article is that the imaginative work of political fiction provides an opportunity to explore the cultural mediation of uncertainties and tensions in contemporary politics and political values. The framing of the series involves a generic mixture of realism and fantasy unusual in the British context and the key themes, which include political trust and the limits of political action, are discussed in relation both to their fictional articulation and their wider reference.

**KEYWORDS** *culture, drama, fiction, national identity, politics, television*

**This is a** case study in political culture, making connections between some of the diverse strands at work in the present political culture of the UK and a particular example of fictional political expression: the television drama series, *The Amazing Mrs Pritchard*, broadcast by the BBC in 2006.<sup>1</sup> What does this six-part series about the rapid emergence and electoral success of a new political party, and the experience in office of a prime minister without previous political experience, indicate about shifts in how politics is positioned culturally and the ‘failure’ of established models of political process?<sup>2</sup>

‘Political culture’ is a resonant, if imprecise, term suggesting the broader contexts within which political structures develop and operate and formal political processes happen. For this reason, within political science it has often been viewed with a degree of suspicion as being too gestural an idea, pointing towards such a diversity of rather ‘thin’ points of reference that it presents an obstacle, even a diversion, to serious inquiry.

There are strong signs that this is changing now. A growing awareness of the wider patterns of meaning and value, the more expansive cultural dynamics within which political activity is situated and from which political change is driven, is coming to be seen as a necessary dimension of political study, not a distraction from its core agenda. There were some early pointers in this direction. Writing about the European Union (EU), Philip Schlesinger (1997) noted in a much-cited article that the concept of 'political culture' might offer a useful corrective to the predominant economism of debate about EU policy, connecting better not only to questions of identity but to core issues of political direction (e.g. those around pluralism and democratization). More recently, the further suggestiveness of the idea has been proposed. Reviewing the state of political communications research, Michael Gurevitch and Jay Blumler (2004) highlighted the notion as providing a productive framework for future comparative studies. They saw the valuations of politics at work in different cultural settings, together with cultural tendencies and patterns, as giving important and under-recognized indicators for an expanded understanding of such areas as journalistic principles and notions of citizenship. Working with an agenda more directly derived from cultural studies, the collection *Media and the Restyling of Politics* (Corner and Pels, 2003) connected questions of culture, including matters of aesthetics and changing ideas of the 'popular', to shifts in both political structure and political practice, including political language. Recently, a substantial contribution to research and argument has been made by Liesbet van Zoonen in *Entertaining the Citizen* (2005), a monograph giving the idea of linkage between the political sphere and popular culture a direct, sustained and provocative address.

Why has the 'culture' idea gained so quickly in its suggestiveness for political analysis? Here the most obvious explanation is the steady, continuing increase in the scope and intensity of the mediation of politics, particularly by television, and the growing incorporation of publicity into a core strategic concern of politics and policy formation. Added to this, in many countries there has been a shift towards new forms of political claims-making and political appeal, competitively seeking affirmative connections with other areas of social and cultural life as the established structures and institutions of political allegiance and value become displaced or attenuated.<sup>5</sup> Thus what 'politics' and 'political performance' now mean within the official political sphere itself has undergone a change. This change is in a relationship of mutual modification with shifts in the meaning of 'politics' in the sphere of everyday life. In this sphere, the idea of the 'public' still provides the normative framework for political identity (including for the role of citizen), but the values of popular culture and the set of appetites and dispositions often referred to as 'consumer culture' have become an influential, and sometimes conflicting, source of orientation.

Although it is possible to overstate the cultural volatility of contemporary politics and, in the process, overlook continuity with the established and



traditional, a significant degree of change has to be admitted, even within the most conservative viewpoints. One widely discussed consequence of change (although it may also be one driver of continued revision in the political sphere itself) is a tendency towards political detachment and cynicism among citizens, particularly the young. The political class, the media and citizens themselves have all been variously blamed for what have been judged, from different criteria, to be the deficits of contemporary politics. Many possible remedies have accompanied the diagnoses, carrying different degrees of practicality. These include a reduced emphasis on political 'spin', reform of political news provision and various approaches to encouraging stronger levels of civic participation, including at local level.

Of course political culture, valuable as a term for indicating a broad area still neglected in research, connects downwards and outwards to very specific and different kinds of cultural practice, requiring different analytical approaches. Some of these will relate more directly to the sociological and ethnographic dimension of cultural research, particularly its concern with the role of subjectivity within forms of action, including 'expressive' action. An example here would be work on pressure groups, political festivals, demonstrations and forms of event, extending to those that develop a distinctive visual and perhaps musical presence alongside their political involvements. More work on 'quieter' modes of politicality would be important too, for example on the framing of the cultural terms in which perceptions of the 'civic', 'citizenship' and relationships to structures of power are now experienced by groups not self-defined as politically active. Other kinds of attention will be more oriented towards texts. Of central significance here are the diverse modes of publicity and journalism to be found at work in helping to constitute the political as knowledge, feeling and possibly action, at different levels and often with quite specific audiences and ends in view.

Within this context, political fictions have a significant role since they are able to work with an imaginative range extending to fantasy which is not usually allowed either to political discourse or to journalism and factual commentary, including most forms of publicity. Thus there is quite often less repression and management of tensions and conflicts, less concern with the linear resolution of arguments. With its marked emphasis upon our engagement with character and involvement in the story, fictional transformation articulates political values in distinctive ways. Although it draws on desires and fears with considerable licence for exaggeration (often comic), it nearly always has a reference point, however indirect, to how the author judges things really to be and people really to feel. This 'realist' connection is present even in the most unrealist of texts, both as a basis for the fictional construction itself and as a means of connecting with given readers and audiences.

There is a long and rich tradition of political fiction in writing, theatre and film, variously employing generic devices from allegory to documentary

naturalism in order to engage, move and make points. Classics such as Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), Zola's *Germinal* (1885) or Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) are joined by an extensive range of works internationally, including those by Asian, African, American and European writers. 'Political fictions' vary considerably in the ways in which aspects of the political are placed within them. Many novels, plays and films have a political dimension, sometimes concerning themselves with the localized and implicit playing out of political structures and circumstances alongside other dimensions of the world that they depict. Among those that address political themes more directly, there are some that work with politicality as a defining feature of their narrative project, making political systems and processes, and perhaps politicians themselves, the key elements of their imagined worlds. Internationally, cinema has continued to produce strong examples of this more concentrated engagement alongside the range of productions which have more indirect and partial connections.<sup>4</sup> Liesbet van Zoonen's (2007) recent exploration of selected texts has valuably opened up the critical perspective on the politics of screen fictions so as to include issues of re-reception and impact.

In many countries, political fiction on television has been determined strongly by the generic system of the medium, making situation comedy, soap opera and the series thriller prominent categories, and making what we have called above serious, 'concentrated' work a rather marginal form of production. In the UK, *Yes, Minister* and *Yes Prime Minister* (BBC, 1980–2, 1986–8) and the recent success of *The Thick of It* (BBC, 2005, 2007) illustrate the strength of the more farcical comic tradition, with darkly satiric series such as the *House of Cards* trilogy (BBC, 1990–5) showing its more realist development across a thriller–satire axis. Occasionally, single productions or short series cut across this pattern. An example here would be *A Very British Coup* (Channel 4, 1988), about a plot to depose a radical socialist prime minister, like *House of Cards*, an adaptation from a novel. In the US, *The West Wing* (Warner Bros, 1999–2006) clearly has become a defining example of 'political television' for global discussion, generating a growing literature of academic commentary (see e.g. the articles in Rollins and O'Connor, 2003). By selecting *Mrs Pritchard* for closer examination, we are focusing on work in which portrayals of the formal political world and professional political action are central and in which (unusually for Britain) comic or satiric purposes, although present, are not defining.

The structure this article will follow involves examining the series within the terms of three key themes. The first is political structure, which includes the way in which the drama connects with ideas about the nature of the electoral system, the character and behaviour of political parties and the broader institutional settings, including international relations, within which politics operates. The second is political values, involving ideas about democracy, honesty, transparency and the play-off of public and private life with which the series works. The third is political people,



the kinds of persons who are depicted as active in professional politics and are seen to support it administratively. Crucial to the whole project of the series, there is also the question of the kind(s) of person who might make the successful transition, beset with risks as well as bringing opportunities, from 'ordinary person' to national politician.

These three themes clearly interconnect with a range of more specific questions, for example, those about the nature of political language and about the nature of media-political relations. The approach below will be to focus on particular scenes in the series, with some emphasis on its initial and closing episodes. First, this article considers some aspects of its overall political trajectory.

## **The series: journey into political space**

Across its six episodes, the series tells the story of a supermarket manageress who, in frustration at the behaviour of local candidates canvassing for a forthcoming general election, forms a new political party (the Purple Alliance, whose candidates are all women). The party attracts a huge national following, including defectors from other parties, and sweeps quickly to an election victory through which Ros Pritchard becomes prime minister (Tony Blair rings her to concede defeat). Challenges arise in relation to the pursuit of radical policy initiatives, the negotiation of intra-Cabinet tensions, the impact of covert corporate influence and the manner in which problems in the private sphere become matters of potential 'public interest'. Having set up its 'amazing' transition in the first episode, the series works strongly with the implicit question, 'How will she do?' As will be suggested, the answers that it offers by the end are not always clear or consistent.

### **Political deficit**

The rationale for the rise and success of the Purple Alliance as portrayed is public frustration with a profound deficit in contemporary politics. None of the existing parties deserves the allegiance of voters. The behaviour of the political class is reprehensible, and redemption lies in its replacement through a much stronger proportion of 'ordinary' people. The nature of the structural and normative deficit, lying beyond the immediate circumstances that spur Ros Pritchard into action, is glossed in different ways. In one variant, men are part of the problem:

What we need, actually, is more women in parliament ... women don't muck about with the truth like men do, because women don't need to, because women can handle being wrong occasionally.

Thus a version of feminism plays its part in the mixture that is the remedy. The Purple Alliance is articulated as the party of 'us', the people, as against 'them', the politicians: 'Politics isn't rocket science,' says Ros

to BBC interviewer Kirsty Wark on the programme *Newsnight* (throughout the series, a number of well-known BBC journalists play themselves), 'I think they like to keep us at a distance from it all by talking the way that they do, in riddles, verbal fencing.'

### **Policies and values**

It is important to note that the Purple Alliance does not gain momentum because of the policies that it espouses, since Ros frankly admits that these are undefined. 'These leaflets,' her daughter asks, learning for the first time that her mother is standing as a candidate, 'what will they say?' Kirsty Wark is interested in this too: 'Well, what is your platform exactly?' Ros fudges: 'I'm just making a point that when people aren't interested, they don't get involved.' Instead, the party espouses values perceived to be lacking in the established political community: truth, decency, common sense. These values, of course, whatever their occasional hints of policy radicalism, point towards centrist politics, a politics essentially grounded in a conventional normative order rather than reconfigured economics. Miranda, her media-savvy political adviser, clarifies this position once the campaign gets underway:

We borrow from the Left and steal from the Right, we make it our own. Bang in the middle of Middle England.

### **The personal and the political**

In the absence of a firm policy agenda, the popular appeal of the Purple Alliance depends almost wholly on the perceived character of its leader whose denunciations of political dishonesty, and the consequent breakdown of the relationship between the political and the popular, must be underwritten by the integrity of her own identity and actions. To this is added a more diffuse, carnivalesque, dynamic of thrill at 'change' itself, at the scale of cultural and political shift envisaged and at its orientation towards the interest of the people, whatever its lack of defined policy directions. Ros's political persona as the decent and sensible non-politician is the basis of her electoral success. It is a dramatically fascinating paradox, latent with contradictions. Crowds applaud when she says, 'When politicians may or may not be telling the truth, who can you trust? Someone who isn't a politician!' Ros's 'offstage' conduct is designed to show us that this is more than just a persona. Her practical managerial sense, grounded in a real concern and care for those she works with, is established at the very start of the series, in a pre-credit sequence where she walks through the supermarket, having friendly exchanges with a variety of her employees. Part of the dramatic interest is in seeing how this 'natural' behaviour will transfer itself to tougher, political contexts.

Ros's proto-feminism paves the way for some 'female bonding' across party lines, notably with a senior Conservative figure, Catherine, before





her defection. The two of them are due to confront one another in the *Newsnight* studio. In the ladies' toilets, Ros is able to do 'my good deed for the day' by supplying Catherine with a tampon, pushed underneath the division between the stalls. More importantly, she points out afterwards that Catherine's career prospects, as a very bright woman in a party of rather dull men, might be better with the Purple Alliance.

## **The series: scenes from political life**

This article now explores selected scenes in the context of the thematic profile and dramatic pattern outlined above.

### **'Reality checks'**

The second episode of the series, about the crucial transition from campaigning to the exercise of power, is one in which Ros is forced to confront the extraordinary reality of the situation in which she now finds herself. More than once she seems poised to allow 'normal service' in politics to be resumed by walking away from what has happened to her and, through her, to the country and the world. This is in part a drama about self-doubt and political power, despite the scale of her electoral victory.

Her 'victory' speech delivered outside Downing Street concentrates, like the campaign, on the importance of 'getting involved':

You must no longer allow yourself to assume that other people know what's best for you, better than what you do. You know best what you want for your children, for your elderly parents and relatives. You know best what you want from your schools, and from your hospitals.

There is no hint that there may be problems in reconciling what different people want: that managing social heterogeneity and social conflict may not be as straightforward as this suggests. The speech ends with specific promises, notionally taken as sincere but dramatically implying question marks, something that will need further checking out: 'I will never lie to you. I will never mislead you.'

Within a few hours Ros has to make a tough decision to send in British special forces to help French soldiers in difficulties (in Iran). In the first place, this sets her at odds with President Bush with whom she has her first telephone conversation. Reprising this conversation later on for the benefit of her family, she fantasizes that she told President Bush what she really thought about British involvement in the Iraq War:

Mr President, did you know that the anti-war in Iraq march in London was the biggest protest rally this country's ever seen, and yet we still went to war at your behest? And frankly I find that a bit disturbing, not to mention something of a mystery.

At the same time she is able to report that she stood up to him on her own first military decision. As she explains to her family, having already



said 'yes' to the French request, 'I can't go back on my word.' Honesty is being put into practice, however tough an option. More distressing than Bush's objection, as events transpire, is the fact that two of the British soldiers fall into the hands of the Iranian forces, and are tortured and killed before they can be recovered.<sup>5</sup> The impact of this leads to an outburst of broader self-doubt in front of her family, one not witnessed by anyone else:

Ian [Ros's husband]: Are you all right?

Ros: I'm the leader of the fourth biggest economy in the world. I'm the President of the European Union. I'm chairman of G8. And I haven't got a fucking clue what I'm doing. Would you be all right?

Dramatically, this admission in the strongest terms of her anxieties, a 'panic attack' from which she recovers, plays into the sense of self-honesty central to her characterization.

### **Britain in the world: two scenarios**

A number of scenes across the six episodes connect with ideas about Britain's place in the world, with particular reference to Europe and the US.

One key incident occurs in episode 4, when an inbound passenger jet explodes over a London suburb, causing extensive loss of life, including on the ground. Initially suspected to be terrorist action, the situation throws Ros fully into the discourses of terrorism and its management. Some of the exchanges in the emergency committee are illuminating for the political identity of the series as a whole. For example, this dialogue between Ros and her Chancellor:

Ros: Why would anyone want to attack us?

Catherine: We *are* a western democracy.

Ros: I've done everything to distance myself from Tony Blair's decision to go into Iraq.

Catherine: We still have troops in Iraq.

Ros: Yes, to try and sort out the mess.

Catherine: Sadly, that's not how Muslim extremists might be inclined to see it.

Even within the conventions of her political 'innocence', Ros's opening question might seem astonishingly naïve, but it provides the grounds for subsequent explicitness about both her own position and the limits to the effectiveness of her political goodwill. This dialogic play-off of tone and content between her 'well-meaning' and the geopolitical savvy of her chancellor, part of the political pedagogy of the series, gains further force in a drama aimed at a popular audience in the context of continuing debate about Iraq.

In fact, the disaster turns out to have had a very different cause. The



maintained. However, its status was legal under a new EU directive recently passed through as a standing order by the British Parliament's European Affairs Select Committee. Thus the debate turns from the discourse of terrorism to the discourse of the EU and its legislative complexity. 'You mean standards have gone down?' Ros asks, and shortly afterwards, 'We've lowered our standards to fit in with Europe?' The Foreign Secretary notes of the directive how 'it went through on the nod, like thousands of bits of legislation from Europe do every year'. She says that she would like to see all laws coming out of Brussels 'subjected to the same kind of rigorous scrutiny that our own laws are subjected to'. It is noted how this might invite 'disciplinary' action by the EU, but to this the Chancellor responds, in tones which play with the thrills of vengeance:

If Europe dares to threaten to discipline Britain for asserting its sovereign right to power over its own affairs, then I will threaten to withdraw our subsidy to Brussels which is worth about the equivalent of ... £1.5 million an hour.

The dramatic populism at work here is intensified by the way in which the scene dramatizes Ros's shocked recognition of the problem, despite its familiarity in outline, and then shows ideas being put firmly into action. Britain's independence is not only celebrated but made politically real, and the discourse of a financially parasitic and legislatively incompetent EU is 'properly' contained at last. If the 'Other' of Islam opened this storyline, the 'Other' of the EU gets a thorough articulation in its ending.

A second major incident involving international relations occurs in episode 5. Standing before a microphone on the steps of a G8 summit venue in Vancouver, with other leaders in the background, Ros declares her unhappiness with the level of environmental action agreed at the conference's conclusion (the US president is declared to be living in 'cloud cuckoo land'). A unilateral move is needed:

And so I pledge here and now that four weeks from today, on Wednesday 24th June and every subsequent Wednesday the people of the United Kingdom will not make a single car journey that does not need to be made. We'll beg, we'll borrow, we'll improvise, we'll use our imagination ... and I hope that other countries in the developed world will have the courage, the wisdom and the compassion for future generations to follow suit.

Her Cabinet colleagues are horrified. On return to Britain, she is quickly advised of the economic implications and the likelihood of public protest and travel chaos. It is suggested that the plan be made voluntary for a year – Ros rejects this modification. In the House of Commons, the opposition leader draws on the established discourses of climate management by way of criticizing and opposing her decision, although the dramatic effect is sharply satirical of his conventional language:

If the Government were serious about tackling climate change they would give us a long-term framework for emission reduction, they would tell us about carbon trading, they would tell us about micropower.

The Chancellor fears the worst nationally, ‘millions of people won’t participate. This could sink us.’ The Purple Alliance is facing its first big test, especially since a by-election (the election of single MP to a specific local area) is being held on the same day as the first ‘Green Wednesday’. Within the collapsed timeframes of the drama, a sense of probable defeat is constructed. There are predictions of public disturbance, the resignation of a senior police officer, the deep concern of transport chiefs. Interviews with motorists set up a sense of indignation and anger, albeit inflected towards the pathetic (‘I can’t live without my car’) and a noisy, anti-policy rally is held in the by-election constituency. However, on the day itself, reporters ready with their ‘travel chaos’ stories start to report something more calm and orderly. Dramatic resolution within this mix of indicators appears first through supportive phone calls received from France, Finland, Norway and Germany. ‘All going to follow suit, one day a week’ the Chancellor notes. The gamble of taking the lead appears to have worked. Finally, by a very narrow margin, the Purple Alliance wins the by-election.

Thus the position of Britain as a country able to make clear ethical judgements and translate them into policy is affirmed. Even more significantly, the economic and individual self-interest arguments against radical environmental policy are shown to be wrong. In what is perhaps the strongest ‘if only’ moment in a drama extensively premised on ‘if only’ ideas, the majority popular response to the requirement to incur personal inconvenience for the sake of the planet is gamely to go along with it. In this respect, the episode brings to the character of the series its strongest and most prominent moment of political fantasy. It dramatizes a triumph of popular cooperation by showing transcendence of the central tension between ‘good’ and ‘popular’ decisions which continues, variously, to trouble real democracies. Ros’s choice of the rule-breaking option is once again proved right, her political liability once more converted into political asset, highlighting her role as that of a kind of provocateur as much as a conventional leader.<sup>6</sup>

### **The ‘old’ within the ‘new’**

We can note three areas in which troublesome dimensions of older politics survive actively within the ‘new model’. First, there is the issue of the integrity of sponsorship and party funding. In the middle of the series, Ros discovers that substantial ‘loans’ to individual MPs from the party’s wealthiest donor formed part of the initial party-building activities. The real dynamics of transparency and disclosure in the Purple Alliance, and its distance from compromising corporate connections, are seen to be not quite in line with its hopes and declarations.

Second, there is the issue of media relations. On the whole, the series presents Ros as having a largely positive press, albeit with scepticism and



opposition around particular policies. However, dealing with the tabloids proves more troublesome, with Ros's political adviser having to resort to sticks (threats of future non-cooperation) and carrots (promises of 'exclusives') in order to maintain a level of damage control. Of course, Ros herself is not seen to be involved in these encounters, neither is she shown to be endorsing them. Nevertheless, that her government succeeds in part by following the older rulebook on news management is significant.

Third, there is the related matter of private behaviour and its potential for public scandal. A number of incidents occur in the series, with an MPs' 'wild night out' giving the Government some bad publicity quite early on, with further exposés likely to follow (only controlled by resort to the kind of tough haggling with editors noted above). A running threat throughout most of the episodes is the involvement of Ros's husband, Ian, in the mishandling ('laundering') of company money for a personal pay-off. Viewers know of this incident (as do senior party figures) long before Ros herself, providing the strongest line of personal scandal in the series, one threatening to destroy Ros's career entirely if it becomes public and she admits knowledge of it.

Things get even more awkward. In the final episode, a 'request' is made through the Alliance's biggest donor that a specific company be awarded the new Home Office information technology contract against other bidders. It comes with a threat that, should this not happen, the husband's financial misdemeanours will be revealed in the newspapers. The 'bottom line' is that so long as Ros herself can be portrayed as untainted, the party's credibility is sustainable.<sup>7</sup> As in the best fairy stories and legends, human frailty may cause the magic to stop working. So the narrative paints Ros into a corner, giving her a moral choice without the possibility of compromise.

For five episodes the characters who know about her husband's past misdeeds collude in keeping this information from her, protecting her integrity. The weak link is her daughter Emily. When Emily's resolve to keep the secret starts to crack, Ros demands to know more and is told the truth. From that moment onward, there is no good outcome. She now knows, and she has promised the electorate not to lie or mislead them. Miranda, the political adviser and the 'wizard' in this fairytale, spells the situation out, along with her own preference for deceit, in a phrasing that connects with questions at the heart of contemporary political ethics:

Ros, you've got two choices. You either go public or you don't. If you go public, he's facing prison and you are seriously considering your position ... If you don't go public, the alternative – and I know this goes against the grain – ... the alternative is that you persuade yourself you know nothing about it, for the greater good. For the greater good of the country, for the greater good of everyone who has voted for you.

The deceit option (for the 'greater good') does not seem too unreasonable, so long as the original misdeeds are in the past, are not hers and have

a degree of circumstantial 'excusability'. However, the blackmail threat requires Ros to contemplate some fresh corruption on her own account: political corruption in order to save her marriage and political fortunes. When asked for advice, her chancellor Catherine produces a different strategic choice: she can sacrifice the former for the sake of the latter – retain her honour by repudiating and divorcing the unworthy husband.<sup>8</sup> The drama pushes her to the very edge of this decision, yet refrains from displaying its outcome. In a cliffhanger ending, Ian is shown entering Ros's office, where he will learn what she has decided. The viewers never learn, though Catherine's judgement that Ian is 'weak' coupled with a declaration by Ros about how much she loves her country, may indicate that the decision has gone against him.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

What does *The Amazing Mrs Pritchard* tell us about aspects of contemporary British political culture and the kinds of discursive, imaginative work that television can perform, not only upon political themes but also upon political subjectivity and sensibility, on the ways in which politics is engaged and felt personally?

Certainly, the series is an unreliable indicator of public attitudes towards politics at the level of their proportional distribution and specific profile. However, as noted at the start of this article, its constructions of political sentiment and political fantasy are premised on a sense of a real public agenda, one in which general perceptions of democratic deficit and points of unease about Britain's identity within global politics are established points of reference. It is for its own project of 'cultural reading' and for its own contribution to mediated political culture that the series is most interesting, particularly so given that this 'reading' is expressed in a fiction of transformation, a drama of subjectivities and interaction, rather than an analytic account. The series tries to 'do things' at the intersection of the popular and the political. It connects with the 'bad' dynamics of disillusionment and tries to weave a story driven by the 'good' dynamics of change. Most importantly for its entire imaginative project, it sets up a resoundingly positive alignment between viewers and a head of government – one that is sustained, albeit with modulations, right through to the end. That this alignment is managed primarily by dramatic sentiment and empathy does not remove from the force of its originality.

As this article hopes to have shown, in the drama itself the whimsicality and resort to fantasy devices (e.g. the time-collapses, foreshortening of process and serendipity of the turn of events) stop short of presenting a heartening narrative of political success, of definitive political solutions. On one level, the election of an all-female government is easily assimilated to the drama's more fantastical dimension. Pritchard's core character, her



commitment, care and integrity, remain largely uncompromised by the end (if with a question mark over their survival beyond the final scene). However, her 'adventure' is one upon which many established features of the sociopolitical setting, including corporate power, career self-interest and strategic media relations, continue to shape events alongside, and often against, her idiosyncratic energies. The series is at points interestingly uncertain and ambivalent on the matter of 'how well she is doing' and on how viewers are to assess as avoidable, opposable or inevitable, those factors that problematize and block the way to fulfilment of the new politics, to the realization of the vision. In this respect, it can be compared usefully with Liesbet van Zoonen's recent characterization of the reflective viewer postings on IMDb ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)) to selected political films, 'a desire for a better politics is present but it is always balanced by a pragmatic, sometimes cynical recognition of real political processes' (2007: 541).

The series can be seen to work across a conflicted agenda of questions, which it variously engages, deflects and selectively draws upon for imaginary resolution. How much of old politics should be taken into the new? What is the relationship between personal virtue and the politically good? How much scope for national independence is there in a globalized context? How does money relate to power? What are the possibilities for transparency and trust in the relationship between people and the political system? These form the underpinnings of a story, of course, not the elements of a direct argument, although their conversion from narrative experience into a political agenda and political reflection will be made by most viewers in different ways, and was obviously an outcome intended by the writer.

The scenario of the series and its populist appeal are weighted towards conservative rather than radical values, the impulse for change grounded in known decencies which have been ignored rather than new ideas about society and economy. That the most obviously radical component of the Purple Alliance, its *de facto* identity as a feminist grouping, should be so understated throughout is a confirmation of this tendency. The rationale for making the Purple Alliance an all-female party rests on an assumption that this particular popular mandate is attuned to 'feminine' values that women naturally possess and men do not, and which have been missing from government to the detriment of all citizens, male and female. This essentialist principle of female moral superiority is put into words publicly only once, by Pritchard, early in the election campaign. It is undermined subsequently by depictions of individual women as very different from one another, divided over policy, and variously 'corrupted' by the realities of power as much as any male Conservative or New Labour politicians of recent history. The real-life implications of this are negative, since they suggest that the values themselves stand no chance in politics, whatever the sex of the elected rulers. The (questionable) survival of the Purple

Alliance as a governing party at the end of the series comes across as the consequence of compromise, not because it has kept faith with any specifically feminist principles.

Equally, the 'democratic deficit' is a matter more of attitudes and values than underpinning structures, although the series certainly engages with institutional change at points. Its explicit but 'polite' post-Blairist moments are entirely in keeping with such a normative strategy. That this should mean revised commitments in relation to the Middle East and the EU undoubtedly catches at real popular anxieties in play and growing, both about the meanings for Britain of the intervention in Iraq and the endlessly revised relationship with Brussels.

*Pritchard* is distinctive in its cross-generic approach to the portrayal of the political realm, a realm of structures and events, experiences and feelings. This cross-generic 'recipe', in part a way of working its play-off between the terms of the politically given, the politically possible and the politically imaginable, was perhaps one reason for its modest success in the ratings given its prime scheduling (it averaged fewer than 4 million viewers). By refusing to centre itself within any of the established categories through which television currently carries out fictional transformations upon the political (e.g. thriller, soap, farce, sitcom, satire) and by working its fanciful narrative up from realist premises, it exposed itself to criticism from those who saw accuracy of detail and 'plausibility' of plot as the most appropriate terms for its assessment. For many professional politicians and political scientists, an expectation of realism, formed in the absence of clear generic indicators to counter this, meant that lack of credibility was an easy judgement. For example Philip Cowley, a specialist in British party politics, noted the implausibility of the shortness of time (two weeks) in which the new Government develops a full range of policy initiatives described by the BBC as 'balanced and sensible' and the overall tendency of the series to be 'politics for morons' (Cowley, 2006). However, as this article has shown, its very design presented it with real difficulties of internal narrative shape and resolution.

Yet in its combination of a known and familiar political landscape with a strong vein of utopianism centred on a highly sympathetic central character (what we have termed its 'fairytale' dimension), it provides a marker of some significance in relation to the long cultural history of imagining how politics 'might be other' and to the present cultural and audiovisual resources for doing the political on television.<sup>10</sup>

The political premise of *Pritchard*, across the aspects described and cited previously, can be located clearly as a version of 'populism': that is to say, it is built around a project of political transformation in which an existing self-interested (and dysfunctional) élite is replaced through the election of 'ordinary people' reflecting popular values and 'ordinary common sense'. Populism has a rich and varied history as a discourse of reformist aspiration which can privilege either radical or conservative tendencies and





quite often attempts to straddle both.<sup>11</sup> One of its rhetorical requirements is a sense of relative unity as to the 'popular will', allowing a relatively uncomplicated play-off against established élite values. However, as we have seen, although the series works with this idea of popular unity at many points, offering it to the viewer as exhilarating potential, it also shows that as something simply to be assumed across diverse interests, it is highly problematic, just as it shows that not all of the established protocols of political life are without value. Populist perspectives also vary in respect of the degree to which they are articulated from a position of genuine (if simplistic) alignment or strategically deployed as a demagogic device to win popular support for policies having other points of origin and orientation. The series shows the Purple Alliance to be working with the former perspective, at least as far as Ros and the key figures are concerned.

The generic experimentation of the series, however awkward, occurs at a time when non-fictional politics is becoming ever-more uncertain and hybrid in its portrayal. The degree to which political journalism now routinely trades on rumour, gossip and strongly personalized 'plotlines' is one notable aspect of this, carrying the terms of fictional engagement closer to the frameworks for real political orientation in a way that has implications for those continuing, broader shifts in political culture that were outlined at the beginning of this article.

The interplay between the various media-generic 'takes' on politics, with their associated moods of amusement, distrust, anger, hope and despair, is likely to develop further as a significant factor in how politics as a sphere of activity is positioned and perceived within everyday living. In this context, case studies of the kind undertaken here offer one way of engaging with the tensions and shifts working their way through the cultural system and media practice in a manner that goes beyond the formulations of critical commentaries and the data of opinion polls.

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### **Notes**

1. The series, made by the independent production company Kudos, ran for six episodes in Tuesday prime-time on BBC One from 3 October to 7 November 2006 (Kudos are willing to provide DVD copies for a fee).
2. The series also generated a related website for the Purple Alliance, on the fantasy premise that it was a real political party. This was no longer being actively maintained at the time of writing.
3. A comprehensive review of some of the factors involved internationally is given in Hallin and Mancini (2004).
4. Among the studies of broader connections between politics and cinema is Wayne (2002), notable for its ambitious transnational perspective on

- European developments. More work on the presentation of formal politics and political change in different national contexts, following the example of Scott (2000) on Hollywood and US politics, or the articles in Rollins and O'Connor (2004), would be valuable.
5. This just months before the highly-publicized capture of real British navy personnel by Iranian forces in the northern Gulf, whose fate was very different.
  6. The functionality of making Ros's oddities of political style work to party and government advantage has been made explicit already by her political adviser, Miranda, in an earlier episode. Miranda, displaying a full-blown strategic, not to say cynical, approach to Pritchardian 'freshness', sees it as the unique selling point of marketing the Purple Alliance, and notes how Pritchard not behaving like a politician is a 'whole concept' permitting the 'unorthodox'.
  7. The parallel with the difficulties which the 'clean-hands politics' of Tony Blair got into quite quickly after his 1997 victory is clear. This included, for example, problems around the exemption of motor racing from a ban on tobacco advertising, when a major racing entrepreneur had recently donated £1 million to the Labour Party.
  8. This too has parallels in the real Westminster world, where culture secretary Tessa Jowell separated from her husband David Mills following disclosures about his financial dealings with Italian premier Silvio Berlusconi.
  9. However, overseas versions of the series appear to have had accompanying material suggesting that she resigned to live happily with her family, her chancellor taking over leadership of the party and the prime ministerial role.
  10. At a number of points in this article we have referred to the 'fantasy' dimensions of the series including, but also going beyond, the generic requirements of comedy drama. Within the context of political culture, fantasies can be seen as important resources for hope and aspiration, involving various kinds of 'contact' with forms of real action. Within fiction, a distinction might be made between political fantasies that are carried right through to resolution within the fantasy frame (fantasies made real), and those that are brought into tension and even collision with given realities, and thus potentially undercut. Clearly, from our own analysis and discussion we believe that *Pritchard* is best placed within this second, broad category.
  11. For example 'populism' is woven into the political development of the US in ways that contrast quite sharply with the history of political culture in Britain and other parts of Europe. This is reflected frequently in the depiction of the play-off between the values of 'Washington' and those of 'ordinary people' in American cinema as well as in written fiction and television. Classic cinema examples would include *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (Frank Capra, 1939) and *All the King's Men* (Robert Rossen, 1949; Steven Zaillian, 2006).

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